

RESPONSE TO THE HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY, COMMUNITY, HOUSING AND YOUTH “INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS LEGISLATION” BY THE NETWORK OF IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN OF AUSTRALIA INC., AUGUST, 2009, PREPARED BY VIVI GERMANOS-KOUTSOUNADIS – NIRWA CHAIR.

The Network of Immigrant and Refugee Women of Australia Inc., (NIRWA) was established in September 2008 as an independent national body that seeks to advocate to achieve, cultural, social, economic, educational and gender equality for immigrant and refugee women living in Australia.

The organisation received an Office of Women Development and Leadership Grant, and the project was auspiced by YWCA as at the time of application the organisation was not registered.

The project was to assist in the development of NIRWA as a national voice for immigrant and refugee women through the development of:

- A website
- to conduct three workshops for CALD women
 - one in Perth held on 12th December, 2008, which provided training on leadership and advocacy and mentoring for 8 young immigrant and refugee women from different states of Australia
 - a workshop in Sydney, NSW, held on 28th March, 2009, on “Housing and Homelessness – Challenges for Immigrant and Refugee Women”
 - and a workshop in Berri, SA on “Why Immigrant and Refugee Women can Inspire”.

The Sydney Workshop on Housing and Homeless – Challenges for Immigrant and Refugee Women.

This workshop on Housing and Homelessness attracted 70 immigrant and refugee women. A member of NIRWA in New South Wales, the Immigrant Women’s Speakout Association, with Homelessness Australia and WESNET in partnership with NIRWA were involved in organizing the Workshop. The discussions covered a number of issues including domestic violence, settlement of refugees and the current housing crisis.

THE PROGRAM

09:00	Welcome to country Words from the Chair: Vivi Germanos-Koutsounadis Non English Speaking Housing (NESH) Women’s Group of clients live drama presentation on “Where is my home?”
09:40	Jane Brock, Immigrant Women Speakout Association – Immigration and Housing Issues

10:10	Tasneen Fatimah, NIRWA Mentoring Program – New Arrivals and Housing
10:40	Morning Tea
11:00	Aileen Solowiej, Homelessness Australia and Meseret Abebe, Footscray Youth Housing Group (VIC) – Youth Homelessness
11:30	Julie Oberin and Pauline Woodbridge, WESNET – Domestic Violence and Homelessness
12:00	Lunch
12:50	Discussion Groups Part I Facilitator 1 Jane Brock Facilitator 2 Vivi Germanos-Koutsounadis Facilitator 3 Meseret Abebe Facilitator 4 Aileen Solowiej
13:40	Afternoon Tea
14:00	Discussing Groups Part II Facilitator 1 Jane Brock Facilitator 2 Vivi Germanos-Koutsounadis Facilitator 3 Meseret Abebe Facilitator 4 Aileen Solowiej
14:50	Presentation by the Group’s Representatives Chathra Wickramasinghe, Elaine Elemani, Tasneem Fatimah and Jorgette Sonter
15:30	Last Words

Report on Sydney Workshop

We are forwarding to you the discussions and recommendations that resulted from the workshop for consideration and deliberation by your Inquiry from a group in the community which is voiceless and unable to express their needs because of lack of appropriate information, linguistic and cultural barriers and lack of cultural/linguistic considerations by government and non government organizations which are funded to assist people to find housing. These recommendations reflect the needs on housing and homelessness of CALD women in Sydney and Australia as a whole.

The report on the Housing and Homelessness was sent to the Honourable Tanya Plibersek, Minister for the Status of Women & Minister for Housing with these key points being made:

- CALD women because of language issues are sometime incapable of negotiating the Australian systems and understanding the laws, contracts, and other obligations and responsibilities they are subject to.
- Women, who have been in a refugee camp, might have never rented a house, paid a bill, gone to work or have had any concept of engaging with institutions such as banks, real estate agents or government departments.
- The cost of private rental accommodation is having a serious impact on the successful settlement of humanitarian entrants. It is causing financial hardship and instability for many refugee families.
- There is an inconsistency in availability and quality of interpreter and translation services.
- High levels of discrimination in the private rental market due to racial discrimination, lack of rental histories and prejudice against sole mothers.
- The women's shelters and domestic violence service system in Australia are seriously under resourced.

In addition, the key recommendations raised by the participants were:

- The COAG should consider the numbers of migrants coming into Australia and the areas that they settle in and proactively plan and provide appropriate support resources to those areas
- The Government should consider providing hostel type accommodation for refugee and humanitarian settlers for a minimum of 2 years to facilitate their settlement into the community
- The Government should plan social housing and refuges with due consideration given to cultural elements e.g. extended families require housing of adequate size and with sufficient facilities
- The Government should review its definition of "housing affordability" for migrants and refugees taking into particular consideration the capacity for sole mothers and their children to acquire safe and long-term housing to facilitate their settlement into the community
- Increase and support the recruitment of NAATI Interpreters of emerging and newly arrived immigrants in order to avoid the non-disclosure of violence and sexual abuse
- The Government should consider the impacts that new settlement has on children of migrant families and respond accordingly with appropriate support services
- The Government should review its rent allowance policy and index it according to existing rental market supply and demand prices
- Provide funds towards community based evidence gathering and research in collaboration with the community sector on homelessness relating to refugee and immigrant women. This information can be used to fill housing requirements and future housing developments

- *Allocating funds to provide secure and hygienic public housing, with fairer and balanced rental regulations (e.g. Better individual case management)*
- *Allocating funds to meet the public housing needs of the increasing immigrant and refugee women's population in Australia*
- *Availability of education on housing and a simpler system (e.g.- Affordable bridging courses)*
- *Generally speaking there is a big shortage of housing, there is not much to choose from, and sometimes safety is jeopardized. Changes such as putting rails on windows for safety are usually not allowed. The tenants end up paying for damages and this should be looked at as everybody should feel safe in their homes*
- *CALD communities need to have education on tenancy rights*
- *There should be a regulatory monitor of the real estate agents, because of the significant increase of rent*
- *Referees - reference for newly arrived communities is really important when they are applying for housing. Perhaps, real estate agents should be encouraged to accept referrals from community leaders and service providers if clients have never rented before*
- *Increase funding for service provision such as the private rental brokerage program.*

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